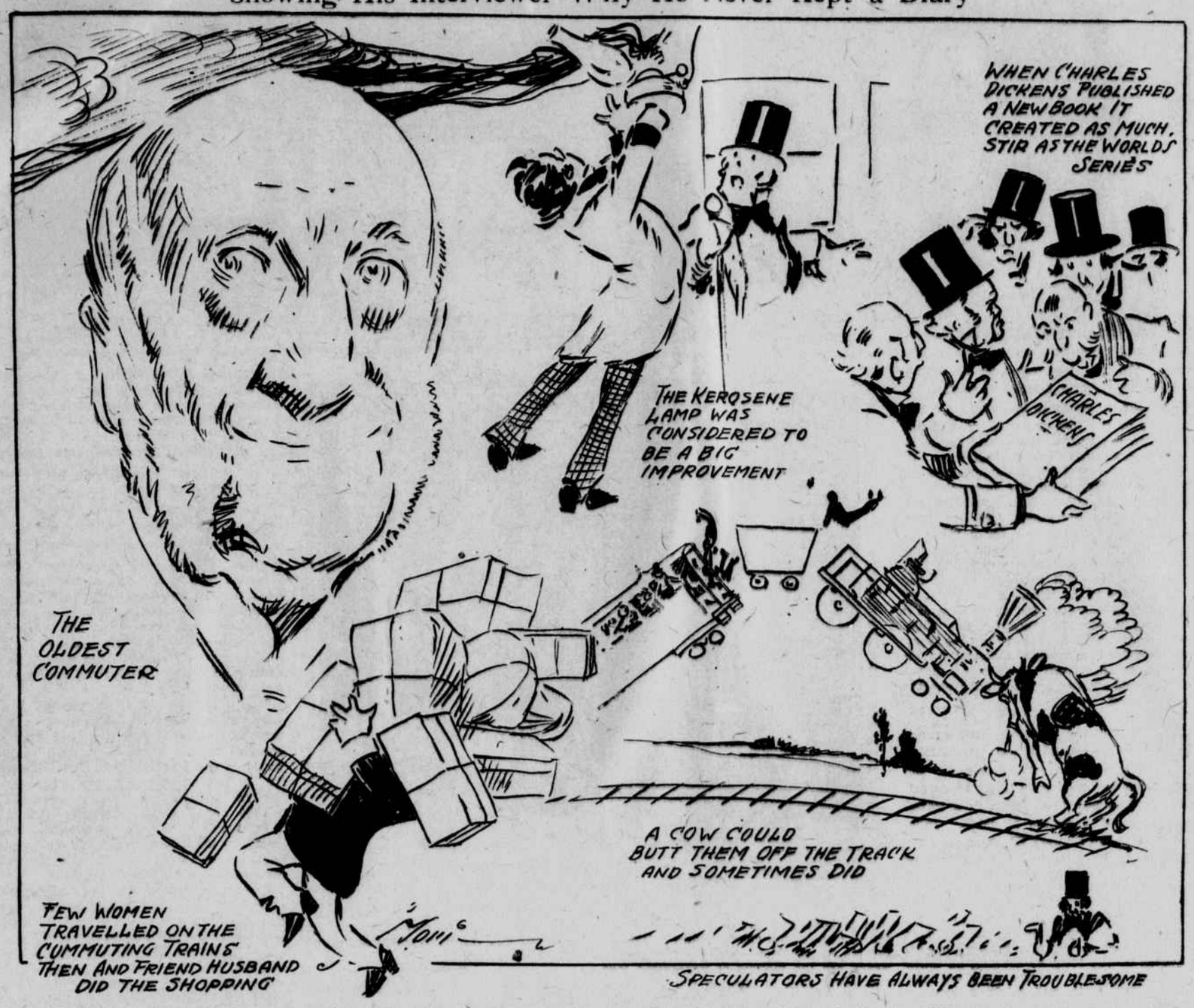
CHAUNCEY M. DEPEW, OLDEST COMMUTER, PROVES IT

Tells of Early Railroading Days Back in 1866 When He Travelled Daily Between New York and Peekskill and Recalls the Vast Changes in Service Since Then, Incidentally Showing His Interviewer Why He Never Kept a Diary

By EDWIN C. HILL.



"NOW that my friend John A. Stewart has retired from the human race called commuting," said Chauncey M. Depew, referring to the ninety-nine year old banker who is still, however, in active business life, "I figure that I am entitled to the distinction of being the oldest commuter."

The man who has made more people laugh than any other person now alive did not look sufficiently burdened with years to claim any distinction based upon extreme age, for, as he stood in front of the fireplace in the drawing room of his home at 27 West Fifty-fourth street, legs planted well apart, shoulders square, hands clasped behind his back, he did not look within fifteen years of the eighty-eight he must acknowledge.

We were chatting over a range of topics, Senator Depew being one of the most entertaining conversationalists I have ever known, and the topic of commuting and commuters bobbed up out of some casual talk on railroading. His eye gleamed reflectively.

"Now, there's another life experience I should have kept a diary on," he ruminated. "Funny thing, but I never have had the diary habit. I should have kept such daily chronicles upon at least three activities—politics, railroading and social life. You will indulge me if I say that I have had some most picturesque and entertaining experiences in all three fields."

"The record, such as it is, all too incomplete as it is, speaks for itself," I interjected.

"Well, perhaps so," said the Senator—it is a title that clings to him somehow. "Maybe, after all, I was wise not to scratch down my everyday experiences. We are apt to get prosy in diary keeping, to set down a mass of trivial and inconsequential experiences which may mean much to us at the time of their occurrence, but which count for nothing after a decade or less. I think one is apt to lose perspective in keeping a diary.

Never Kept Diary of Letters And Finds Memory Serves

"Not so long ago," he continued in that pleasant voice of his, "I made it my business to read up on a number of important diaries. Take John Morley's. After reading Morley's I was glad I had kept none myself, for in writing his autobiography he simply dumped into it the masses of his diary, and this made several volumes of very tiresome reading. No, it may interest you, Hill, to know that I have never kept any sort of record of any of my experiences in a pretty active life.

"I never let letters accumulate and I retain no other memoranda except numerous published speeches full of anecdotes and personal experiences. In preparing my autobiography, which after several months' pretty steady work I have just finished at a length of 140,000 words, I was myself surprised at the fruitfulness and clearness of my recollection of men and events. I checked up wherever possible, but in almost every instance I found that my original recollection was reasonably accurate and faithful."

It's a pity always to divert Senator Depew as he runs easily along the smooth highway of his fluent conversation, but I wanted very much to hear something about the railroad commuting of the old days, the suburban travel of sixty years ago. Therefore I asked him to turn the lantern of his mind back into the nineteenth century, and pretty far back, and tell me what he discerned.

He laughed.

"Well, let's see," he began. "It's hard to begin. I have been running back and forth between New York and Peekskill or some other point up the Hudson for sixty years easily. I became attorney for the road in 1866. That was fifty-five years ago, and for four or five years previous to that, in politics, I was a commuter in good standing—had to pay my way, too, which is more than they made me do when I became one of their counsel. Say sixty years covers my commuting experience.

"Possibly you didn't know commuting was that ancient? As a matter of fact, commuting and the running of trains began at the same time. I have in my office—it is one of the curiosities of the office—a commutation ticket that was made out on May 1, 1856—sixty-five years ago—to one T. C. Van Hoesen, and this ticket, No. 75, cost the gentleman $112.50, enabling him to travel between New York and Sing Sing (evidently he was not a boarder in one of our well known institutions up that way) for a whole year.

"Pretty cheap when you come to think about it, though Mr. Van Hoesen and fellow travellers didn't get as much for their money as commuters get nowadays. Those tickets were as big as cabinet photographs, and although they were supposed to be used only by the person whose name was signed thereupon they were passed through the family and even used by outsiders.

Days of Brilliant Conversation Instead of Mere Card Playing

"As I think of the old days when I used to climb aboard the old wooden, kerosene oil lighted cars of the Hudson River Railroad the circumstance that sticks in my mind is the good talks we used to have—the really brilliant and valuable conversation that enlivened these trips up and down the river bank. I never saw cards played then. There were no auction or poker parties killing time in the club or regular cars for a trip of an hour to two hours such as are so familiar now. Cards were nowhere so popular as they are now. I think an old fashioned religious prejudice against them still existed and interdicted their use except in rather ultra-modern, exceptionally gay circles. The men who travelled daily in those days of sixty years ago loved the sound of their own voices and took a good deal of pride in their general knowledge and culture.

"I remember our set of commuters from Peekskill used to gather habitually around a very brilliant lawyer—long since dead—and follow his lead in a running conversation that lasted all the way down or up the Hudson, and in which we settled most of the problems of the universe. The discussions were sometimes quite violent, although I do not recall anybody ever issuing a challenge to a duel.

"Politics, religion, literature were the three great topics. When Charles Dickens published a new book it created as much stir over here back in those days as the world series in baseball does now. That's hard to believe, perhaps, but I assure you that such was the trend and bent of men's minds then when I was a youth.

"Local happenings took up a good part of the train conversation of that time, for the twice a day meetings on the commutation trains furnished a clearing house of town or village gossip, but as a rule the talk was on more important things and was of a very high order.

"What has become of good conversation? Has it gone to that mysterious bourne which has swallowed up the art of letter writing?

"Then men talked or read books. One seldom saw a newspaper in the commutation trains of more than half a century ago, where now there is a paper hiding every face.

"I spoke of Mr. Stewart a moment ago," Mr. Depew continued. "He is the oldest man living that I can recall as a fellow passenger. Back in those days he commuted from somewhere near Yonkers, I think, and I remember very clearly what a keen and competent mind he had when he interested himself in our discussions. His conversation was always shrewd on political and financial conditions. I was not much more than a boy when he said to me on the train one day:

"'You have a talent for public life. That is excellent. Train yourself for it. The country needs people who are competent for that service. They ought to be as well trained for public service as for banking or railroading.'

"Simple common sense, of course, but I remember that Stewart's words of long ago made a deep impression upon me. A great deal of our trouble has come through the inefficient government of poorly trained men or through the blundering of men not trained at all but boosted into office by political machines. But I must not be too discursive. We are talking about commuting.

"Few women travelled on the commuting trains then, and Friend Husband did the shopping. It is perfectly easy to see where the ancient jest of the overburdened, staggering commuter sprang from, because I have lively recollections of Smith or Jones or Brown executing the orders of his better half and conveying home from New York a mule's load of odds and ends. Travel was not so agreeable for women folk, you see, as it is now, and they had not then so much the habit of travel—for I have found that travel is something of a habit. That knowledge enters into the psychology of railroad management.

"Speaking of shopping, it was not a very discreet thing, so far as one's own town was concerned, to do much shopping in New York. Buying out of one's own little village was not *au fait* at all. It made one unpopular among the local tradesmen, who had their own little ways of squaring the account. Moreover, they kept a close eye upon travellers, and if Brown came home with an armload from Brother Stewart's store down where THE NEW YORK HERALD is published now the whole town knew it and commented unfavorably upon it.

"Am I rambling too much? If so stop me, but I am chatting about the topic of old time local train service just as things flit into my mind. Commuting, as I think I have said, dates back to the earliest days of railroading, when the old horse cars were running in and out of New York. Even in the early sixties, when steam engines were dragging trains down to Thirtieth street, horse cars were used to haul the passengers from there to Chambers street.

"They were funny old trains, now that one looks back upon them over the sweep of half a century or more, for there is a vast difference between the commuting of to-day and commuting when I was a young man just starting a career. They used old wooden cars then. Many of the trains were made up of such cars, with seats along the sides, though the Harlem Railroad had cars with cross seats. The seating capacity then was from fifty to sixty persons.

"Heat for the coaches was supplied by two wood burning stoves, one at each end of the car. I have a very clear recollection of the times when brakemen, too lazy to build a fire in the wood burners, set a red lantern inside the stoves to fool the passengers into believing they were getting heat. We are used to different comforts nowadays, but I certainly would like to see some of the present day grumblers riding in the coaches they used back in the sixties, when even the little old engines were fired with wood.

"The first lights used on the Harlem road," Senator Depew resumed, "were sperm oil lights. Some of the other roads used candles. The kerosene lamp period came next, and this was considered to be a big improvement. Pintsch gas lights were brought into use about 1889, I believe, and were hailed as a wonderful boon to travel. The change from these to electricity began about fifteen years ago and was gradual.

"The first steam locomotives used for local traffic were the so-called 'Forney' engines. These old timers were double enders, made to run forward or backward. They were of standard gauge construction, but so light that a cow could butt them off the track, and sometimes did. The change in coaches was a gradual development from the small wooden ones with open platforms to sixty foot cars and then to the multiple unit cars which seat eighty-two persons and cost $48,000. At the present time the coaches used for local travel south of Croton on the Hudson are multiple unit, and the rest are standard coaches hauled by electric motors, all steel.

Bright Yellow and Light Green Colors Used on Sister Roads

"In the early days a distinguishing feature of commuting was the variety of colors marking the various divisions of the railroads. In the early eighties the Harlem road used light green cars and the Hudson River Railroad was known by its bright yellow coaches. The earliest commutation zone was about what it is to-day, stretching as far north as Pawling and Poughkeepsie, but it was a very different looking zone sixty years ago than it is now. There were then wide stretches of field and forest where there are now solidly built up communities.

"The first commuting was on a limited scale, for there were comparatively few persons—not more than 2,000 or 3,000, I should say—who travelled regularly up and down the river. I am only guessing at the number, but it surely could not have exceeded it much. The growth in commuting has been steady, but its biggest development, according to the figures of the New York Central Railroad, has been in the last decade.

"Commuting, I may add, has never been a source of profit to the roads, but it is valuable to them because of associated interests. When communities are built up a traffic in freight necessarily arises. Therefore railroads have always encouraged commuting and have given service at extraordinarily cheap rates. The rate to-day, for example, is six mills a mile on the average, while the regular rate is 3.6 cents a mile.

"The first commutation tickets were sold on an annual basis and were very much like an annual pass. There was no punching by the conductor then. The holder did not have to identify himself by attaching a photograph to the ticket. Later on such tickets were sold on a semi-annual basis, then on a quarterly basis and finally the monthly arrangement was adopted. Speculators, by the way, have always been troublesome to the commutation railroads, and I can recall the annoyance caused by these sharks up to half a century ago, it seems to me. Naturally, as traffic increased they increased in numbers and boldness, and it is because their illegitimate activities have seriously cut into receipts from commutation that the New York Central has been forced to make such strict regulations concerning its commutation tickets.

Gigantic Outlays Necessary To Meet Demands of Commuters

"The gigantic proportions which commutation travel has assumed and the outlay it has compelled the New York Central Railroad to make is well illustrated by the improvement of the road's passenger terminal facilities at the Grand Central Station. The introduction of electric power over a zone extending over thirty miles out of New York city involved the complete reconstruction of the terminal yards as well as the building of a great station with the track levels excavated out of solid stone.

"Incident to the improvement, which was begun in 1904, hundreds of thousands of dollars had to be spent upon substantial but temporary construction; new tracks, new signals and many other details had to be provided for temporary use, only to be ripped out again as the work progressed to a permanent basis. Whole areas of switches and tracks in service were lowered overnight. The whole train shed was taken down over the heads of passengers and new buildings were erected over moving trains.

"Street travel was maintained over all construction possible, and gas, water and sewer pipes were changed without interruption to service. More than 3,000,000 cubic yards of earth were excavated, requiring the exploding of more than 1,000,000 pounds of dynamite. More than 125,000 tons of steel were erected and more than 350,000 cubic yards of concrete were put in.

"During all this time travel passed through the terminal without noticeable delay and without the curtailment of schedule or accident to a passenger, although more than 150,000,000 passengers used the station while construction progressed. With the terminal completed and electrification installed, the smoke and dirt that annoyed old time commuters became a thing of the past. The yards were cleaned up, the overhead bridges in Park avenue from Forty-sixth to Fifty-sixth street were removed, the avenue was remodelled into one of the finest streets in New York and the whole commuting situation was improved a thousand per cent. We are very proud of what was done in changing the terminal, and it has made the lot of our brand of commuter a much happier one.

Fast Local Trains of To-day Contrasted With Early Ones

"The fast local trains of to-day are vastly different from the local trains I used even thirty years ago. Those who rode regularly in those days recall that the trains then stopped at Fifty-ninth, Seventy-second, Eighty-sixth and 110th streets, and that one could take New York Central trains to go to the ball games. Frequent stops have been eliminated, and the fact that 243 New York Central trains are in and out of the terminal every weekday shows the volume of commutation travel.

"In addition to these trains it must be remembered that there are 161 trains in and out over the tracks of the New York, New Haven and Hartford. These figures do not include specials or extra sections of regular trains.

"Passenger travel in and out of the Grand Central Terminal shows a marked increase, being nearly 300 per cent. greater than it was thirty years ago. About 30,000 commuters use the New York Central and the New Haven trains every day, and the New York Central alone, including the West Shore road, handles 25,000 commuters daily."

Senator Depew stopped here.

"That's about all I can think of, I believe," he said.

"I can see," I replied, "why you have never kept a diary."

Old Downtown Hotels That Made City History

NEW YORK and Paris have not much in common, but they do resemble each other in the cold blooded way they wreck famous old hotels and erect on their sites new buildings that better serve modern needs and purposes. The hotels that figure in books of travel when to make the grand tour was the proper way to finish off a young man's education, and those which are the scenes of famous novels written in the 50s of the last century, Paris knows no longer. They have been succeeded by the Elysee Palace, the Metropole and a score of other modern caravansaries. While one writes one would not be surprised to hear that the Grand Hotel, the famous hostelry near the Grand Opera House, had been razed.

Unsentimentally have New York's ancient hotels been treated. Let but the flood of fashion ebb about their vicinity and down go the old houses, leaving "not a rack behind," not a regret and recollections only in the minds of a few old boys.

Stevens House Lasted Long. But Old Age Was Pitiable

The Stevens House, at Broadway and Morris street, lasted a long time, but to a pitiful old age, without dignity or romance. French's of Park Row, occupying the site of what is now the Pulitzer Building, knew better than to lag superfluous. Three or four other houses which are important in the annals of down town are, like these two, forgotten as if they had never been. One hotel in this district had "soul" enough to have impressed itself on everybody who came to New York. This was the Astor House, at Broadway, Vesey and Barclay streets. Part of the old structure still stands.

French's Hotel stood for forty years and enjoyed a prosperous career owing to patronage drawn from the New England States, upper New York and the Middle States. It was strictly a commercial hotel, run on the American plan, which was the general plan in the years following the civil war.

During its last years French's lost some of its "class" and drew clients from more economical people, and the plan was tried of letting rooms without meals and a restaurant was opened on the street floor. In the basement of this hotel the late A. W. Dennett, who was the originator of the "quick lunch," opened a room with sawdust on the floor and started to feed the thickly populated district with beans, pie, wheat cakes and "sinkers."

From this beginning Dennett's grew to great proportions, with branches in various sections of New York and Brooklyn and extending to Philadelphia and Boston. The largest of his New York places was at 25 Park row, where thousands of persons, including some newspaper men, were served daily.

Dennett Noted for Charities; Lost His All and Died Poor

Dennett was a very religious man and used to hang signs in the shape of Scripture text in what some critical persons called his "joints," besides holding religious services morning and evening for his "help" before they began their hours of service. He was noted for his charities, and among these was a free lodging house at 39 Bowery, where he fed the down and out "without money and without price." He died almost penniless, having distributed most of his money in charity and wasted a portion of it in bad investments. The name, once a "household word" in New York, has entirely vanished from the restaurant field.

Earle's Hotel stood on Canal street and Centre street, and there the fortune of the Earle family was made. After the closing of this house Gen. Ferdinand P. Earle became the proprietor of the Hotel Normandie, at Broadway and Thirty-eighth street, which he built. He was the first landlord of the Hotel Netherland, at Fifth avenue and Fifty-ninth street. His sons for a time operated the Park Avenue Hotel.

The Astor House was New York's best known hotel for three generations. It was built massively of granite, without exterior ornamentation. Allen and Dam, its best known proprietors, conducted the house in a conservative way. Except for the great rotunda—the place where the best luncheon New York has ever known was served—the ground floor was rented in stores. In its early days the Astor was patronized by society, and historical balls and other functions were held there. It was the temporary home of all the famous people from all over the world who visited New York. In 1850 Jenny Lind was a guest there, and it was back to this famous hotel that she drove after her great triumph the night of her debut in America at Castle Garden.

Great Vogue of the Metropolitan In Centre of Dry Goods District

The Metropolitan Hotel was a brownstone structure which stood at Broadway and Prince street. It was the property of A. T. Stewart and, being situated in the centre of the wholesale dry goods district, it was largely patronized by merchants visiting New York. This house was run from the beginning on the European plan, and from 1870 to 1880 its dining room had the distinction of being the largest in New York. Henry Clair conducted it during its heyday of prosperity. In the Metropolitan was included Niblo's Garden, where our grandfathers—poor, simple souls!—were pleasantly shocked by "The Black Crook" and "Lydia Thompson's Blondes."

Henry Clair was likewise the proprietor for a time of the New York Hotel, an imposing (for the time) red brick building on Broadway, extending from Washington place to Waverley place, with fancifully wrought grilles on iron balconies on each of the four stories. This was the favorite inn of the Southerners who used to come in droves to summer in New York before the war. As the lovely daughters of the South were in the habit of coming out on the balconies to breathe the evening air, the New York and its vicinity became a promenade for male New York.

Later Henry Cranston, whose name is often heard in reminiscences of hotel New York, ran this famous hotel, and in fact under his management it touched its zenith. He is the same Henry Cranston who built the West Point Hotel, Cranston's, on the bluff at Highland Falls on the Hudson. This famous hotel has been converted into a convent.

A few blocks above the New York stood the St. Denis, at one time a very popular hotel, famous for its "good eats," and a few blocks below was the Southern Hotel, later called the Grand Central and still later (and at the present writing) named the Broadway Central. The last named house in its early days was called a rival of the New York Hotel. It was built in the early 70's by the late E. S. Higgins, the carpet manufacturer, who wanted and was willing to pay for "the most palatial hotel in America."

In 1892 the house was bought by Tilly Haines, a popular hotel man from Boston, who gave it the name it now bears. On the stairway leading from the office to the second floor is the spot where Edward S. Stokes shot Jim Fisk.

Site Interesting Theatrically As Marking Famous Old Theatre

The site of this hotel is historically interesting. The rear of the building on Mercer street covers the ground on which stood Tripler Hall, later known as Burton's London Theatre. Here Edwin Booth played "Hamlet" for 100 consecutive performances, then the longest run of any theatrical production before a New York audience.

There are still living old men who regret the demolition of the St. Nicholas Hotel, which stood at Broadway and Spring street. The cornerstone of this imposing white marble building was laid September 24, 1851. D. Henry Haight built the hotel and named it after the St. Nicholas Society, of which he was an enthusiastic member, and the society looked upon the place as a second home. For thirty-three years it gave the law to hotel customs, and every year saw many banquets and other social events of great interest taking place there.

Uriah Welsh, called "the prince of bonifaces," opened the cornerstone box when the building was pulled down in 1884. He found therein speeches of men of the St. Nicholas Society and a copy of THE NEW YORK HERALD, dated the day the stone was laid in place. From the St. Nicholas Hotel graduated many of the more prominent hotel men of a later day, among them Samuel Hawk and Gardiner Wetherbee, who opened the Windsor Hotel on Fifth avenue.